

# best workplaces for commuters

By Steve Offutt, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Every day millions of Americans wish there were more hours in the day to get things done. In fact, the average commuter spends more than 100 hours every year commuting — that's more than two full weeks of work, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

More than 1,300 employers across the country are helping to remedy this problem by allowing more than 2 million employees to reclaim their lost commuting time — or at least helping to make it more productive — by offering commuter benefits such as subsidized transit passes, vanpool passes and telework arrangements. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) now recognizes these employers as the nation's "Best Workplaces for Commuters." To qualify, employers must meet a National Standard of Excellence, which includes offering a "primary" benefit, such as a transit pass subsidy of at least \$30 per month; three "supporting" benefits, such as lockers and showers for bikers, ridesharing services and employee commuting awards; and access to an Emergency Ride Home, among other benefits. This article provides the best practices in commuter benefits from three of the top performers from the EPA's list of more than 1,300 organizations: IBM, Turner Broadcasting System (TBS) and Calvert. These employers

offer progressive commuter benefits that help their employees maintain a healthy and satisfactory work-life balance.

## IBM

IBM is a worldwide leader in the invention, development and manufacturing of advanced information technologies, including computer systems, software, storage systems and microelectronics. With nearly 140,000 employees in the United States and more than 315,000 employees worldwide, IBM has added 17 U.S. worksites (more than 55,000 workers) to the list of Best Workplaces for Commuters since 2002. IBM is one of the nearly 70 *Fortune* 500 companies to qualify for the designation.

The company began offering commuter benefits as a way to improve employee commuting, increase morale, boost

retention rates and cut costs. IBM has taken a worksite-by-worksite approach to determining which commuter benefits to offer. Thus, each worksite offers a commuter benefits package to meet the needs of its employees at that particular site. Benefits include transit subsidies, telework and proximate commute options, compressed and flexible schedules, vanpool programs, shuttles, racks/lockers/showers for bikers, preferred parking and discounts for carpools and vanpools, and on-site amenities.

Telework and proximate commutes are two of IBM's most used commuter benefits options. Most worksites participate in IBM's national Mobility Program, in which employees are given equipment, such as laptops, cell phones and printers, needed to work from home. In some instances, people can utilize conveniently located "mobility centers" where employees share and reserve work spaces, averaging one desk per four employees. The company provides telework policies and guidelines, training and responsibility agreements, and makes extensive use of communication technologies, such as using the Internet for meetings, conference calling and video conferencing.

"Work-life balance, flexibility and employee mobility have become essential workplace programs at IBM," said Maria Ferris, director of global workforce diversity programs. "These programs

## QUICK LOOK

- The average commuter spends more than 100 hours every year traveling to and from work.
- More than 1,300 employers across the country are helping to remedy the commuter problem, and are being recognized for their efforts by the federal government.
- Employees who believe they have job flexibility are able to work eight more hours a week and still feel they have work-life balance.

help employees become more productive while providing a menu of choices, which helps them create the right balance they desire as individuals.”

In an IBM internal study conducted by Brigham Young University, the company found that employees who believe they have job flexibility are able to work eight more hours a week and still feel they have work-life balance. Another internal survey conducted by the company in 1996 showed that teleworkers anticipated staying with the company the longest and showed the greatest job satisfaction. The survey also revealed that 87 percent of IBM’s teleworkers were “more” to “far more” productive because of teleworking. The average IBM employee’s personal productivity increased between 10 percent and 20 percent after implementing teleworking, but only a 0.1-percent increase was needed to make the telework program cost-effective, according to Telecommute Connecticut.

In addition to increasing employee productivity, telework options also have helped IBM reduce its overhead costs associated with leases and facility expenses. In total, IBM saves more than 7,500 workspaces, 2 million square feet and more than \$100 million per year in reduced real estate costs.

## Turner Broadcasting System

A subsidiary of Time Warner, TBS Inc. is a major producer of news and entertainment products around the world and the leading programming provider for the basic cable industry. The company was designated as one of the Best Workplaces for Commuters in January 2005. In 1999, 2000 and 2004, TBS Inc. was a PACE Award recipient, an annual award bestowed by the Clean Air Campaign that recognizes the most effective and innovative commuter transportation programs in Georgia. The company also is a past

winner of the HOVie Award from the Georgia Department of Transportation for its efforts to encourage and facilitate use of the High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes.

According to the 2005 *Urban Mobility Report*, commuters in Atlanta spend an average of 67 hours stuck in rush-hour traffic. In addition, the average family spent more than 19 percent of its budget on transportation costs in 2003 and more than \$800 on auto insurance each year — a number that is steadily increasing, according to the Surface Transportation Policy Project. TBS Inc. is helping alleviate congestion and save its employees time and money by fully subsidizing monthly transit passes on all of the major transit lines in Atlanta, including Cobb County Transit, MARTA (the light-rail system) and Gwinnett County Transit. The company also pays the cost of vanpools for employees who live outside of Atlanta. The costs include purchasing or leasing vans, gas reimbursement, toll reimbursement, insurance subsidies, maintenance subsidies and other related costs.

TBS Inc. also offers an array of benefits to encourage its employees to try different ways of getting to work. For instance, employees who are willing to give mass transit a try at least once a week can receive free transit tokens. Those interested in biking or walking to work are eligible for special coupons, and carpoolers can use reserved parking spots close to building entrances. TBS Inc. supports all of these programs with a full-time commuter assistance desk — an important part of keeping employees well informed. “Our programs are inspired by the experiences and insight of our employees, and designed to serve their needs,” said Kelly Regal, executive vice president of human resources and corporate communications. “We’re proud that our efforts as corporate citizens

and Atlantans to raise awareness of community options have been so favorably received.”

## Calvert

For more than 25 years, Calvert has offered a broad range of investment products and services, including the nation’s largest family of socially responsible mutual funds. Listed as one of the Best Workplaces for Commuters since May 2002, the company operates one worksite in Bethesda, Md., with 180 employees.

With approximately 16 percent of greenhouse gas emissions being released into the atmosphere through the use of personal transportation each year, according to the EPA, Calvert is doing its part to help reduce air pollution and traffic congestion by keeping workers out of single-occupant vehicles. Calvert introduced transportation benefits as part of its overall business of being a socially responsible employer and hopes to continue to improve the lives of its employees.

The company offers transit and vanpool subsidies of \$75 per month, telework and compressed/flexible scheduling options, and incentives encouraging employees to live close to work. One way Calvert demonstrates the importance of work-life balance is by providing incentives to workers to improve their health and well-being. For example, at the request of its employees who walk, run or bike to work, Calvert began providing \$120 a year to purchase walking or running shoes, or a one-time \$350 subsidy to purchase a bike. In addition, employees have subsidized fees for various health-club facilities located near work.

“We recognized the financial burden, as well as the psychological and emotional toll, of commuting to work in the Washington, D.C., area,” said Judy Shober, Calvert’s work-life coordinator.


"We felt that relieving much of the burden and stress of commuting would enhance our associates' daily lives in a way that would also enhance their job satisfaction and productivity." Shober has seen the difference. One employee switched to public transportation after trying it for a few days while his car was being repaired. He loved being able to relax during the commute, read the paper and arrive at work feeling fresh.

In total, turnover at Calvert has dropped from 25 percent to 12 percent after implementing the commuter benefits program, and Calvert management sees the plan as integral to its recruitment and morale. "It is the heart of who we are and what we stand for as a company seeking to make a positive difference in the world," Shober said. The company has gained attention for the quality of its employee programs in publications such as *The Washingtonian*

magazine (named as one of the area's 50 family-friendly companies) and *Working Mother* magazine (one of the top 100 companies for working mothers). Calvert also has been a recipient of the Maryland "Work/Life Alliance's Excellent Place to Work Seal" for six years.

### What Can Your Company Do?

To encourage employees to perform at their best, organizations should ensure that benefits packages meet the EPA's National Standard of Excellence and become one of the Best Workplaces for Commuters.

By offering innovative benefits such as subsidized bus passes, telework opportunities and compressed work-weeks, companies will distinguish themselves from their competition, which can help with recruitment, retention and engagement. 

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